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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the response of one locality, a rural county in Western Massachusetts, to the reality of rural homelessness. Jessie's House, in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, is a short-term emergency shelter providing meals, housing, and advocacy to homeless families and individuals. The shelter has a staff of three full-time residents and two part-time nonresident staff, serving about 18 "guests" each night. The program operates on a model that attempts to adapt itself to the particular needs of homeless people in the rural area. The report details the following 5 ideas central to the Jessie's House model: (1) a cooperative household that accepts a wide variety of members; (2) an ecological relationship with the community in order to provide the homeless with the assistance they need; (3) a network of responses addressing the many needs of homeless people; (4) a team approach to service delivery, sustaining staff in a collaborative manner; and (5) responsiveness of feedback, assuring that the program will adapt to changing causes of homelessness. The paper also describes changes staff have made in the program since its founding. In 1985, the primary need of homeless people was perceived to be support services, and the Jessie's House staff worked to help other agencies develop and manage support programs. Today the perceived need is for low-cost housing, and Jessie's House is working to develop it. The paper emphasizes the importance of Jessie's House as a specific and flexible community response to the problem of rural homelessness. (TES)

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A Rural County's Response to Homelessness

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A Rural County's Response to Homelessness

Contrary to the images portrayed in the media, homelessness is a situation, not a population. While the bag lady or the unshaven man huddled over a sidewalk grate may represent some homeless people, in fact, many homeless people do not fit this stereotype. The usual image is of people who live in urban areas, are unemployed, are single, and who have multiple problems such as mental illness and substance abuse. In fact, additional homeless people live in small towns and rural areas, are employed full time or going to school, live in family units, and have as their major problem, the lack of affordable housing.

The reality about homelessness is that it affects multiple populations and derives from multiple causes. Given this reality, it follows that the response to homelessness must be diverse as well. The response of a rural community will be different from that of an urban community, and one rural community's response is different from another. This paper describes the response of one locality, a rural county in Western Massachusetts. It is of interest, not just as a model program which may have relevance to other rural areas, but also as a model of a process for fitting the response to the locality's problems and strengths.

Jessie's House

Jessie's House is a short term, emergency shelter providing housing, meals, and advocacy to homeless people in Hampshire County in Western Massachusetts. Families, single people over the age of 16, and elderly who have lost their homes, may use time at the shelter to gain perspective on their problems and work towards solutions.

The shelter serves approximately 18 people each night, many of whom stay for two or three months. It is located in a large Victorian house near one of the three major population centers in the county. It is staffed by three full time and two part time nonresident staff, one resident staff person, three part time staff who share weekend coverage, and a number of volunteers.

Jessie's House began in 1981 when a volunteer network of community organizations began meeting to address the problem of homelessness. Their first task was to document the perception that had brought them together, that contrary to people's image of a rural environment, there really was a severe housing shortage here, and that numerous people had no place to live. Over a nine month period, they documented that over 100 people were homeless in the county each month, that half the cases were families, and that over half the people involved were children. Major reasons for homelessness cited included a lack of affordable housing, interruption of personal income, and family problems.

These characteristics: the fact that the homeless in rural New England are children and families, as well as single people,

that inability to locate affordable housing is frequently involved, and that family disruption is often a component, have had a very strong influence on the program model that has been developed in response. At the same time the homeless in this county also include single people and people with substance abuse and mental health problems. Clearly the program model needs to have multiple components.

The Program Model

There are five metaphors that help describe the program model:

1. The household itself operates as a cooperative household, at its best an extended family living in a large house.
2. The household exists in a ecological relationship with its community.
3. The program is not one program, but many, existing in a loose network with each other.
4. The team model of service delivery is essential in developing and sustaining the vision of collaborative relationships internally and externally.
5. The program model is never static, but is committed to obtaining and responding to feedback about its effectiveness in serving homeless people in this locality.

The Cooperative Household. The internal culture of the house is that of an extended family. People who live in the house are called guests and are treated with respect. Jessie's House believes in the dignity of each person who comes to the door and attempts to provide a peaceful and affirming place where people can resolve their housing dilemnas. When guests first arrive, at the very least, they are experiencing the high stress of having no

place to stay. It is assumed that they will need time and space to relax and regroup. The kitchen table, with its coffee pot and the free availability of good food, is at the heart of both the house and the program.

However, the cooperative household also establishes a structure that encourages participation. Parents need to be responsible for their children, and guests contribute to the running of the house. At weekly house meetings, guests volunteer for house cleaning tasks. Meals and clean up are planned at these meetings and handled by the guests. Those who stay at Jessie's House share in the joys and the responsibilities of a cooperative setting.

Guests who stay for more than a few days are also expected to make a commitment to themselves. Again, the "extended family" culture facilitates the process through which guests come to acknowledge problems more openly and gain strength to take steps to resolve them. An extended family, is by its nature, a public place. It is very difficult to hide dysfunctional family interactions, substance abuse, emotional problems, etc., when one shares meals, chores, and decision making.

An extended family also is a caring place and meets people where they are. The attempt is made to build affirming relationships that emphasize strengths, many of which the people may not see or value in themselves. Once a trusting relationship begins to form, people can trust enough to share their weaknesses and begin working on solutions. The responsibility for the process remains with the guest. Staff do not "do for" people, but

work as facilitators of the process.

It is also important to note that extended families do not assume that complete independence is the appropriate goal for all members. The nineteenth century household created long term, supported living situations for its vulnerable people: the young, the elderly, the sick and disabled. Today, most homeless people have absorbed the twentieth century value of independence and autonomy, declaring that "all I need is a place to live." In fact, the experience of Jessie's House is that, for more than half of the guests, a transitional or permanent supported situation is a better alternative. Teenage mothers, mentally ill people, alcoholics and drug users, Vietnam Veterans, are examples of people whose issues often do not get resolved by a two or three month stay.

In summary, the cooperative household, particularly one that is an extended family, accepts a wide variety of people and scales expectations of its members to their abilities. It is a place where fun and relaxation are valued equally with responsibility and task completion. It is a noisy place where it is difficult to hide, and, at its best, it is governed by open communication and trusting relationships. Jessie's House doesn't always attain this state, but the metaphor is an important part of its vision of what it wants to be.

An Ecological Relationship. The cooperative household exists as part of the larger community, at best in a relationship of both taking and giving. An ecological relationship with the community characterized by frequent cooperative exchange, is crucial to ensuring that guests get the services they need. It is equally important in developing a secure funding base for the program and in enabling the program to address the multitude of barriers that confront homeless people. A collaborative approach is key to all exchanges.

Over its four year history, Jessie's House has struggled to identify the ideal staffing needs for this program. Too few staff lead to staff burnout; too many, and there is a tendency to create dependencies. The program's aim is to provide minimal services in house, as the guest's stay there is temporary, and to facilitate permanent connections with such services as counseling, medical services, day care, adult literacy, job training, etc. For that reason, strong cooperative relationships with the county's social service providers are important.

Equally important is a simularly diverse and collaborative set of relationships with individual and organizational funding sources. The State funds 50 - 75% of operating costs, but demands a substantial local donation. Rural areas have few wealthy donors, and consequently, the program is sustained by many smaller gifts. Key among these are in-kind donations of time and goods. Volunteers provide much of the receptionist and secretarial services, and also house management service during the evening. The Red Cross has organized volunteers to cook for the Evening

Meal Program, which provides the main meal four nights a week. A steady barage of "stuff" comes through the door including food, clothes, furniture and household goods to help families just starting out again. Local churches and the Salvation Army provide numerous small grants to help individual guests with specific financial issues. A yearly membership drive helps with operating costs, as do local towns, the County, churches and United Way.

The ecological relationship is also critical in developing coalitions to work on larger systemic change. The range of bureaucratic barriers facing homeless people is immense. Federal and State welfare and housing programs seem mired in red tape. Numerous social service responses to such problems as substance abuse, mental illness, or to such groups as teen mothers or Vietnam Vets are hopelessly inadequate. Transportation and a geographically dispersed population complicate responses. However, a homeless shelter, even a good one, is at best a bandaid. Responsiveness to the problems of homelessness implies coordinated political action with other groups in the community. Again, effective collaborative relationships are the key to effectiveness.

The structure that fosters this ecological relationship with the community is the Advisory Board. This group of approximately a dozen people represents a cross-section of the groups and individuals that Jessie's House needs to accomplish its mission. The Advisory Board not only provides assistance to the program about internal matters, but also is very important in raising awareness in the community about homelessness, raising funds,

coordinating services among agencies, and organizing political action on key issues.

Jessie's House provides an important service to the county, but also receives a great deal from individuals, social service agencies, local charitable organizations, and governments. The high level of relationship has not only benefitted the program economically, but also has been very important in heightening the community's awareness of the complex issues involved in homelessness.

A Network of Programs. Implied in the understanding of the multiple causes of homelessness is the reality that no one response or program is adequate. Though Jessie's House has attempted to respond to the need by offering shelter to many groups of people, single as well as families, young as well as old, nonetheless, even its flexible admission policies are not enough. Therefore, from the beginning, Jessie's House has offerred three programs, two of them formal and one of them informal. In addition, over the years it has initiated or assisted in the development of several other programs as well.

The program that is described above is the major focus of the work at Jessie's House and is a short-term transitional program. It works with people who are willing to make a commitment to themselves. Assistance is provided with a housing search, saving the money for a down payment, as well as obtaining other services that people may need. However, the program also serves people who have chosen homelessness as a lifestyle. Program values respect

people's choices and believe that real change only comes from within. At the same time, no matter what their choices, the program's belief is that this society is affluent enough to feed and shelter all people. Therefore, a second formal program serves chronically homeless people on a space available basis for up to five days. A third program that is operated at the overnight manager's discretion, is the "couch program". People do get let in off the street at night and sleep on the couch, providing that the manager feels their behavior will be safe for the other guests in the house.

Because there has always been a greater need for emergency and "couch" shelter than the program can accommodate, Jessie's House staff worked with a local church to develop and operate an overnight "cot" program during the winter. People prescreened by Jessie's House staff, get a bed and may stop into Jessie's House for a meal. The church donates its facilities and church members staff the program as volunteers. A future aim is to extend this program to other seasons.

Additionally, a major learning in four years of service has been that finding permanent housing is not an effective solution for many guests. A 1985 study indicated that more than half of the individuals and families needed a higher level of support. Since that realization, the staff at Jessie's House has worked with other agencies to open a program for homeless mentally ill and another for teen mothers and their children. Other such programs are still needed and are a major source of staff effort. The ideal, only partially realized, is to offer a network of

options to people that ensure a very basic level of existence for those who choose it and offer a range of levels of support to others desiring to make change.

A Team Model of Service Delivery. The need to develop an empowering relationship with guests and a collaborative relationship with the community demands from staff highly complex, cooperative skills. The program believes that these skills are best taught and nurtured in a team relationship where hierarchical authority patterns are minimized and high cooperation valued. The staff at Jessie's House has struggled to identify effective, collaborative skills. They have discovered that collaboration, contrary to what one might think, demands clear roles and needs strong leadership. Equally important is the development of individual supportive relationships. However, team members must be willing to pitch in where needed, do multiple tasks, and make the most crucial decisions by consensus. Good communication skills and a strong willingness to confront conflicts openly are very important.

The development of clear job descriptions, which are congruent with the program's values and promote collaboration rather than conflict, has been an evolving challenge. The non-hierarchical model requires that each person feel unique and contribute leadership in a specialized area. At the same time, the program model is unusual and the specialities that have been developed have few parallels in other agencies. Additionally, cooperation, good communication and a willingness to share tasks

and back each other up is just as important as specialization.

Currently, staff include a Program Director, who provides overall leadership to this program. She is assisted by an Operations Person, who helps with administrative tasks and with maintaining the facility, which has all the infirmities usually found in 100 year old houses. Two Advocates work with guests, the Housing Advocate who helps locate housing and teaches good tenant skills, and the Family Advocate, who models good parenting skills and helps locate day care and other family services. Two part time people manage the generosity of the community. A Volunteer Coordinator trains and supervises the many volunteers so that their services are useful to the program. A Vista Worker rides herd on all the donations of food, clothes, linens, furniture and so forth. A Resident Manager lives in and staffs the house overnight during the week, and Weekend Staff provide similar services on weekends and holidays. Finally, a part time staff person provides professional oversight to the kitchen and laundry.

What is shared among all staff is the task of building relationships with guests. A guest may bond more easily with one staff person than another, and visa versa. The aim is to allow freedom of choice so that trust levels may be enhanced. A second task widely shared is attending to the day-to-day needs of both the house and the guests. Everyone does their share of answering the phone, taking people to the doctor or other appointments, hugging a child, grocery shopping, etc. Everyone also is responsible for filling in for each other during vacations and

illnesses.

The staff has learned that developing and maintaining the team model is difficult and takes vigilence. Avoiding conflict and confrontation, a rather natural human tendency, is particularly dysfunctional and has resulted in periods of low morale. Communication is also a constant concern - between professional staff and volunteers, day staff and night staff, weekday and weekend staff, etc. The staff has learned the hard way that staff meetings are crucial, as is individual supervision and clear written communication via the logs.

The high need for clear communication and active conflict resolution also dictates the size of the team. Collaborative relationships are difficult in groups larger than twelve. However, a twelve person agency is very vulnerable to both internal and external pressures. Jessie's House has solved this problem by joining the Center for Human Development, a large, sophisticated, regional agency which provides financial and managerial services to numerous small agencies. The Agency is highly decentralized and by design, does not interfere in the daily workings of the program. However, it provides the umbrella for hard times: a credit line and expertise in dealing with the numerous local and state bureaucracies that impact the program, training for new personnel, good personnel benefits and policies, and back-up to the program director when she has to be absent.

Responsiveness to Feedback. Of all the aspects of the program model, the willingness to learn continually, both about people who have become homeless and about the wider environment which impacts their lives, and then to change the program model in response to that learning, is the most important. The description of Jessie's House presented in this paper would have been different a year ago and will be different a year from now. A few observations about the history of the program should demonstrate the importance of responding to feedback.

It is symbolic that the program's beginnings were rooted in action research. The needs assessment described above involved a dozen agencies collecting statistics voluntarily for a nine month period. It was the first such study in the state and remains a remarkable piece of research for volunteers to undertake. At the same time, the members of the task force visited a number of programs around the state to gather ideas for the program model. There was, and remains, an essential modesty on the part of these volunteers about their own understanding of the problem and the validity of the solutions proposed.

The community has also been willing to learn from its mistakes. The first shelter, established by the Task Force in 1982, was Prospect House. Prospect House was an overnight shelter located in the basement of a hotel and not open during the day. It had one staff person and was staffed almost entirely by volunteers. The program provided an important service, but it is a tribute to the Task Force that they very quickly saw the problems with the program and continued their efforts to develop a

better alternative. The program was inadequate for families with children, as it left them on the streets during the day. The site itself was not enhancing, and both the funding and staffing inadequate.

While one part of the Task Force kept Prospect House going, another group continued its research and proposal writing. In the Fall of 1982, this group was notified that its proposal was tentatively funded. If the group could locate a site, appoint a reputable managing agency, and raise 25% of operating funds, then the State would provide the remaining 75% of the funds for the first year and 50% thereafter. While the Task Force was delighted with the opportunity, and was able to comply with the requirements within a four month period, it also faced a major conflict because Prospect House, which had incorporated as a nonprofit agency, was not selected as the managing agency.

It is a tribute to both sides that the conflict was eventually resolved cooperatively with both sides recognizing that the model that became Jessie's House better met the needs of the homeless in the county. Prospect House closed the night before Jessie's House opened, and the Board went on the develop still other responses to the varied needs of the homeless people in the area.

While Jessie's House remains a service in the community, it too has changed radically over the years. Its staff during the first year was convinced that the major problem people faced was lack of housing. By 1985, however, staff were faced with what they saw as an unacceptable failure rate. A staff person again

undertook a research project, going back through all the cases for the past year and trying to look honestly at what the needs were. The discovery that over half the people needed supported residences, radically changed the direction of the program. Since that time, a great deal of staff time has been spent helping other agencies develop and manage supported transitional living options. One of those options, a home for teenaged mothers and their children, was developed by the Prospect House Board.

Today, the staff is again feeling dissatisfied with its performance. The rate of placement in housing has been declining steadily, as the community's stock of low cost housing has radically declined. Staff are once again redirecting their energies, serving on Task Forces and participating in projects to develop low cost housing.

Throughout its history, the structure which has been important in reinforcing this self-reflective process has been the annual program evaluation. At the end of its first year, in 1984, staff morale was at a low ebb, both because of some internal problems, but more importantly because staff's expectations for themselves were not being realized. They decided that the situation was serious enough that they would close the house for a week in order to have the time to think. The learnings that came out of that week were so important that the staff has, at least partially, closed for a week each year. They use the time for a rigorously honest look at their success rate with guests and at their own functioning. They also complete a statistical description of the year that has been important in helping to identify trends that demand further revision of the program model.

Summary

The program model currently informing the work at Jessie's House attempts to adapt itself to the particular needs of homeless people in our rural area and to take advantage of the strengths of a rural environment. Families with children form a much higher percentage of the homeless in rural areas. At the same time, single people need services, too. Program models need to address multiple needs. Rural areas lack large financial resources, but are richer in a tradition of small giving and cooperative approaches to problems.

The program model that has evolved addresses these issues:

- The Cooperative Household accepts a wide variety of members and is a healthy and growth producing atmosphere for children as well as adults.
- The Ecological Relationship with the community, is essential in providing guests with the multiple sources of assistance they need, in developing a strong, diversified funding base both for the program and for individual guests in need, and in developing collective responses to complex social problems.
- The Network of Responses addresses the multiplicity of needs.
- The Team Model of Service Delivery trains and sustains staff in delivering services in an empowered and collaborative manner.
- Responsiveness to Feedback ensures that the program

adapts to the changing causes and society's evolving understanding of homelessness.

The five part model attempts to respond to the understanding that "homelessness" is but one of many labels that society has historically used in order to simplify its understanding of its vulnerable and disadvantaged members. More important than a label is a community response which is both specific and flexible, providing services based on current understandings of the needs, but remaining open to new learning about the people receiving assistance.

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